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SUBJECT: ICRC CHIEF REVEALS FARC AND ELN CONTACTS ON POLICE HOSTAGES; OFFERS VIEWS ON ELN AND FARC PEACE TALKS

REF: BOGOTA 11611

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood.

Reason: 1.4 (b,d)

Summary

¶11. (C) International Committee of the Red Cros (ICRC) Colombia Head of Delegation Juan Pedro Schaerer said December 21 the FARC and ELN had called him the previous day to make arrangements to transfer 29 police hostages to ICRC custody. The army located the hostages before the ICRC could finalize transfer arrangements. Schaerer said it was likely the guerrilla groups wanted to hand the hostages over to the ICRC to embarrass the GOC. With regard to the December 12 international commission proposal for a security zone for GOC-FARC hostage exchange talks, Schaerer characterized President Uribe's quick and public acceptance of the proposal as "unnecessary" but said he "would not be surprised" if the FARC also accepted the terms. According to Schaerer, the FARC Secretariat is divided on how to respond, and the fact that it has not yet answered is probably a good sign, since a "no" response could have been issued quickly. The FARC's acceptance would be ironic, he said, because only the FARC has troops currently in the zone and therefore only the FARC would have to "demilitarize" in that area. Schaerer said the ELN is financially weak and fears a FARC attack in Arauca, following the ELN's killing of a major FARC leader in that area. Schaerer plans to visit Havana mid-January to meet the ELN and discuss how the ICRC could support the GOC-ELN talks.

End summary.

FARC and ELN Call ICRC

¶12. (C) Schaerer told D/Polcouns December 21 the FARC called him on December 20 to say it had 29 police hostages from the FARC/ELN December 17 attack near San Marino (Choco Department) and wanted to hand them over to the ICRC, "quickly, very quickly, today." Schaerer said he started to make arrangements for a helicopter, eventually obtaining one in Medellin from the Antioquia Governor. Some 30 minutes after the FARC call, the ELN phoned Schaerer to say it had the 29 hostages and needed to hand them over soon. Schaerer told the ELN of the FARC call and asked if the ELN was coordinating with the FARC. The ELN said it was, and explained that the FARC's communications capability "was not

strong at the moment," hence the ELN assistance. (Schaerer said the FARC call was on a very poor quality line, whereas the ELN call was clear.) Schaerer flew to Medellin and started to make arrangements to place ICRC emblems on the helicopter. He informed the GOC ("they were very pleased") and the army ("they did not seem to have an idea of where the hostages were"). While Schaerer was awaiting a further call from the FARC/ELN to tell him where the helicopter should go, the army called Schaerer to say it had custody of the hostages. (FYI, Embassy had released four Blackhawk helos on an emergency basis the day before to help GOC rescue efforts, at some cost to spray operations. Since the rescue, they are back in the field.) Schaerer said a total of less than three hours had elapsed from the time the FARC made the initial call to the time the army phoned to say it had the hostages.

ICRC Assessment of FARC/ELN Calls

¶3. (C) Schaerer said he believes the FARC/ELN had always intended to hand over the 29 hostages to the ICRC in order to embarrass the GOC. The FARC has done this before. Schaerer speculated the FARC/ELN might have wanted to accelerate the release of the hostages to the ICRC because of GOC military pressure, and perhaps released them rather than wait for the ICRC to arrive for precisely this reason. In Schaerer's view, the FARC/ELN was probably not under strong military pressure, however, because the groups have a significant presence in the area and the military "was only flying helicopters."

¶4. (C) Schaerer said it is difficult to assess how well the military did in locating the hostages. He was concerned that

the military might have been listening to his conversations with the FARC and ELN but, since neither group told him where the hostages were being held, he is not concerned that GOC telephone intercepts led the military to a specific hostage location. (Such a situation, had it occurred, would have damaged the guerrilla groups' confidence in its communications with the ICRC, he said.) The FARC called Schaerer again on December 21 to ask the ICRC to issue a statement to the effect that the FARC had intended to release the hostages all along. Schaerer told the FARC he had already responded to press inquiries on the subject, referred them to the articles, and declined to issue a further statement.

FARC and the International Commission Proposal

¶5. (C) Schaerer said it was "unnecessary" for President Uribe to accept immediately and publicly December 12 the international commission's "security zone" proposal for GOC-FARC talks on a hostage exchange (reftel), but he "would not be surprised" if the FARC also accepted the zone. The FARC was in a tough position now, because it has guerrillas currently in the zone (some permanent, others entering and leaving) and would have to remove them. It would be ironic, Schaerer said, if the FARC had to "demilitarize" the security zone while the GOC did not because there were no security forces present. Schaerer expressed doubts that the proposed 40 international observers (whom he said would be drawn from the militaries of the international commission countries: France, Switzerland, and Spain) could cover the 65 square mile security zone territory, especially at night, but later said if the FARC accepted the proposal he would expect it to respect the demilitarized nature of the zone.

¶6. (C) In Schaerer's view, the FARC Secretariat is divided on how to respond to Uribe's acceptance of the security zone and the fact that the FARC has not yet answered it is probably a good sign, since a "no" decision could be issued very quickly. Schaerer said Manuel Marulanda, "Mono Jojoy," and Raul Reyes were "not open" to exploratory talks with the GOC, whereas Cano and "Catatumbo" "were more open." He said

press reports that the commission had met with Catatumbo were false; the ICRC accompanied the commission's preparatory team and there were no meetings with the FARC. The ICRC understands that the commission emailed the security zone proposal to Reyes on December 12. According to Schaerer, Reyes never uses his computer personally, for security reasons. Schaerer said it was likely that a lower level person logged on for Reyes, printed the proposal or placed it on a disk, then delivered it to Reyes, who in turn shared it with other Secretariat members. This process could have taken a day or two, or over a week, depending on the location of the parties.

¶ 17. (C) With regard to substantive FARC negotiating objectives, Schaerer said the FARC knows it cannot expect Uribe to return 500 FARC prisoners to the FARC ranks, nor can it expect Uribe to secure the return of "Simon Trinidad" and "Sonia," both imprisoned in the U.S. He said he is not even sure the FARC knows yet what its bottom line is if it eventually meets with the GOC. "They are very difficult to understand," he said.

ELN Weak, Worried about FARC; ICRC Travel to Havana

¶ 18. (C) Schaerer said the ELN is weak because it has lost significant revenues that it previously obtained from "oil taxes" in Arauca, obtains less income from kidnappings, and does not (unlike the FARC) get involved in large-scale narcotics trafficking. He is unsure of the exact number of hostages the ELN holds (NGO estimates are about 500, although it is not clear how many have died in captivity), but said the percentage of hostages to ELN fighters was high, much higher than for the FARC, and maintaining the hostages alive is expensive. (Schaerer was scathing about the ELN's reliance on civilian kidnappings for income and its use of anti-personnel mines, both of which he characterized as "serious international humanitarian law crimes.")

¶ 19. (C) Schaerer said the ELN is very concerned about the consequences of its recent killing of Arauca FARC leader "El Che." Schaerer is not sure if the ELN knew what it was doing when it killed El Che, but he said the ELN is worried and convinced the FARC is planning its revenge.

¶ 110. (C) Schaerer said he plans to visit Havana mid-January to meet with the ELN regarding the status of the GOC-ELN talks and discuss ICRC assistance. (The GOC-ELN talks will resume in Havana late January.)

WOOD